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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the skills and competency base of the school librarian. The paper contends that these attributes are necessary if the school library is to be in a position to encourage the development of discovery and personal growth for both pupils and staff. The paper concentrates on the role of the school librarian working with teaching staff to make these conditions most fruitful. As well as traditional librarianship skills, the paper identifies a range of skills and competencies associated with management, marketing, and evaluation. The paper identifies a number of ways in which the librarian may work effectively with teaching colleagues. The paper concludes that, without this foundation, effective ongoing learning in the school library will be limited in extent and progression. As a result, the role of the library will be unperceived and undervalued. It is, therefore, important that time and energy are given to these essential aspects of the development of the school library. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/MES)

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The role of the school librarian in providing conditions for discovery and personal growth in the school library. How will the school library fulfil this purpose in the next century?

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Abstract

The paper looks at the skills and competency base of the school librarian. The paper contends that these attributes are necessary if the school library is to be in a position to encourage the development of discovery and personal growth for both pupils and staff. The paper concentrates on the role of the school librarian working with teaching staff to make these conditions most fruitful.

As well as traditional librarianship skills, the paper identifies a range of skills and competencies associated with management, marketing and evaluation. The paper identifies a number of ways in which the librarian may work effectively with teaching colleagues.

The author concludes that without this foundation, effective on-going learning in the school library will be limited, in extent and progression. As a result, the role of the library will be un-perceived and undervalued. It is therefore important that time and energy is given to these essential aspects of the development of the school library.

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Paper

Introduction

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The librarian (1) in a secondary school (2) typically employs a range of skills and competencies to enable the school library to be in a position to encourage the development of discovery and personal growth for both pupils and staff

This paper concentrates on the role of the school librarian working with teaching staff (3) so that these 'conditions' for effective learning are most fruitful.

Skills and competencies

The school librarian utilizes skills and competencies to enable her/him to be:

a. an effective communicator within the institution
b. proactive with colleagues in the organisation
c. politically skilful in order to develop and maintain relationships with individuals and take account of differing power bases that exist within each institution

For a variety of reasons, the school library is usually not regarded as automatically relevant, meaningful and useful. The manager - the librarian - of the facility makes it so.

S/he does not do this by being skillful and experienced only in traditional skills and attributes of librarianship, cataloguing, classification and indexing, important though they are, but in a wide range of skills and qualities that are not specific to librarianship but generic. These skills - qualities, even - include listening; watching; talking in a focussed manner; understanding the 'big picture'; flexibility; appreciating that priorities shift; tolerance and constructive selfishness.

Managerial roles

The school librarian will apply these attributes to the following common managerial roles (for a school librarian):

a. provider of a major centralised learning service within the school
b. manager of resources (in almost its widest sense)
c. promoter of services and resources

In addition, the school librarian will act as a tutor and teacher and as an evaluator of resources, all to support effective learning.

This paper contends that to enable discovery and personal growth to occur in the school library, the librarian needs to be aware of, reflect and influence the following:

- the school's mission statement, aims and objectives
- the governance, management and organization of the school.

Just reflecting these 'on paper', i.e. documentation is not enough. That is simply an 'inspection' or audit exercise. The librarian needs to be skilled in understanding what the school wants to achieve. The school library policy and development plan can then be harnessed to support these aims - arguably the need for pupil discovery and personal growth should appear somewhere, in some guise. This will be discovered by the librarian who then has a pivotal role in enabling and ensuring that the school library policy and development plan supports pupils' needs for discovery and personal growth.

Resource management

A librarian's management skills will focus on the need for effective resource management,

including budgeting, to provide specific, identifiable conditions for personal growth to progress at a measured pace. Without a range of appropriate resources, personal discovery cannot occur. By 'appropriate resources' I mean those discovered by the librarian and subject teacher working co-operatively. Typically, the subject teacher may be experienced in specific texts closely associated with the subject and the librarian will be more versed in resourcing around the area in a more general sense. However, this may not be the case every time. The important thing is that librarians and subject teachers communicate with each other.

Personal discovery does not limit itself to subject foci but will - if serendipity has anything to do with it - be wide ranging. Successful personal discovery by pupils in a school library means a heavy responsibility for the school librarian. It will be more difficult, though not impossible to liaise with teaching colleagues when seeking to resource personal discovery in the widest sense. Pupil focus groups can also be consulted. Other advisers too may help, such as school library support agencies. Stock knowledge and awareness of trends in publishing are useful competencies for school librarians here. A school library policy may usefully indicate the boundaries that a school library can go in order not to dissipate financial resources needlessly, but this should not stop 'inappropriate' resource provision occurring, by which I mean stocking the unexpected. How often does one read in biographies and magazine interview articles how a book, unexpectedly seen or recommended and read, changed someone's life. The most important qualities here for the school librarian will be: stock knowledge, flexibility and the ability to take a gamble.

In addition the librarian will need to work assiduously with teaching colleagues through the following ways:

- library committee
- other working groups or committees in the institution
- departmental meetings
- on-going liaison with staff

Such methods - often well-tried and tested - are necessary foundations to allow conditions to evolve to enable pupils to make discoveries about knowledge and learning and develop their own personal skills. Pupils' skills include not only information-handling and study skills, but those of evaluation, not least with regard to developing personal tastes.

Marketing

Whilst promotion and marketing are different, they have sufficient 'cross-over' to be discussed together, at least in a paper of this length. School librarians are remarkably similar to librarians acting in a solo manner in other types of organisations, such as businesses, research bodies and hospitals, in as much as they must connect with their customer or user base.

Also, as in a department store where goods will not of their own volition 'walk off' the shelves and magically appear in the hands of grateful customers, libraries must promote, entice and cajole users to use library resources, enjoying and discovering as they go along.

In a school setting, the library may be subtly different from other areas of the school, in that it must be different! It is not a classroom, but can be a refuge, a resource bank, a shop-window, an exhibition and display area, a place to 'chill' out, to meet others and to relax in. All this must be managed, for it is still a facility within a school.

Within the school library, the librarian needs to 'see' with the eyes of an interior decorator and that of a department store manager. The general ambience must be appropriate and specific 'goods' excitingly presented and promoted.

At the same time, the librarian is operating in marketing mode within the organisation with arguably a different clientele, the teaching staff, liaising and connecting in order to make the

conditions right for discovery.

A tall order! The skills and competencies needed in this scenario are not only those associated with marketing and promoting, but also general management of a facility, time management, prioritising, forward planning and so on.

Is this difficult, even impossible to achieve? It will vary in individual circumstances, e.g. what support is available. Of all the aptitudes required, perhaps one of the most important is that of judgement. Certainly, judgement to say 'no' in certain circumstances, e.g. it is not manageable because it is not in our development plan. At the same time, 'yes' might be the right answer, because the librarian's judgement is that s/he can be flexible and take advantage of new opportunities and so on.

Evaluation

Evaluation can be divided into quantitative and qualitative evaluation. Whilst the former bespeaks sound practice, it is often the qualitative that can be the more enlightening and useful. Nevertheless, the librarian should use a blend of the two kinds.

In some schools, the librarian needs to act as 'witness, prosecutor, judge and jury' in evaluating the effectiveness of library provision and use, and can only rely on irregular external inspections for feedback. Hopefully, in the majority of schools some assistance will be available to provide evaluation, whether it be library committee, senior management, pupil users (and non-users) and staff. In on-going situations, feedback from teaching staff on library performance is essential, and is an aspect of effective liaison on which a librarian may spend a good deal of time and energy. Nevertheless, the librarian should always develop skills and techniques of evaluation. For solo librarians, such as librarians in schools, this can be a difficult skill to develop, but is a very useful one.

Conclusion

Without these foundations, effective on-going learning in the school library will be limited, in extent and progression. As a result, the role of the library will be un-perceived and undervalued. It is therefore important that time and energy is given to these essential aspects of the development of the school library. However, the school librarian will be the best person to assess just how to do this - because s/he is the possessor of a basket of the appropriate skills and competencies identified in this paper.

Notes:

(1) By the term librarian is meant a professionally qualified and experienced person. In the UK, the professional body of librarians, The Library Association defines a chartered librarian as someone who is qualified academically and by experience to practise as a professional librarian and listed on the Association's register of chartered members. In addition, the Association indicates that chartered librarians working in schools '… have expertise in matters relating to information and information handling, learning resources and the learning process'. (The Library Association, Effective learning and the National Curriculum. Curriculum Guidance series, London, The Library Association, 1996.)

(2) Whilst I refrain in this paper from referring to specific educational types of institutions, I am considering the role of the librarian in a secondary school. By this is meant a school catering for pupils or students between the ages of 11 and 18. The paper may be relevant to librarians working in other types of schools, but the secondary school is the type of school the writer of this paper has in mind.

(3) The school librarian teaches. Whilst this is accepted, for clarity only in this paper, I have

referred to teachers in a school as 'teaching staff' or 'subject staff'.

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The school librarian, core competencies, curriculum development and staff liaison
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